DON'T GET CAUGHT LOOKING UP
Acts I:6-11
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The first authentic opponent of religion I ever encountered was a college professor who simply dismissed the whole business with a phrase I will always remember. He said religion was nothing more than "pie in the sky bye and bye." His point was that religion seems largely to have to do with the hereafter, but we must do our living and working and loving and dying in the here. Religion seems to have to do with the heavenly, ethereal, otherworldly, but the tasks of human life are carried on within the mundane confines of time and space. Religion seems to have to do with the proverbial debate about the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin, while the exigencies of life in 1981 have to do with how many more human mouths we are capable of feeding before the Malthusian volcano blows its stack.

The disciples of Jesus were talking with Him one day in that mysteriously unreal segment of time after His death and resurrection. There is only one account, written long after the fact, by a man who was not present. The church calls the incident the Ascension. Back in the days when creative alternate worship styles were first emerging, churches regarded as most "with-it" observed Ascension Sunday by releasing helium balloons. In one church which I know the balloons didn't come back down on schedule and the irate father of the bride whose wedding was to be held in the sanctuary demanded that they be shot down with an air pistol.

Many preachers avoid the Ascension text because it is so easy to get bogged down in historic and scientific detail. But more important, the Ascension seems to direct our theological attention to heaven, which is to say, in the opposite direction from the incarnation. My experience is that a religion which is heavenly, "out of this world" is much more comfortable and manageable than one which celebrates the fact that the Word of God became flesh.

What a delight, therefore, to discover a nuance in the account I had never seen before. I am convinced, by the way, that there is humor, whimsy, in Biblical material which eludes us because of our sober assumptions, or perhaps because a book bound in black leather, printed in tight double columns on onion skin, doesn't feel or look humorous, or interesting - or human, for that matter. But I keep bumping into stories that make me chuckle and I now believe the authors had a sense of humor and twinkle in the eye, at least part of the time.

There they are talking to Jesus, and He disappears, is taken up, and the disciples are standing around gazing up into the sky, and two men come along and say, in effect, "Gentlemen, why are you standing there with your head in the clouds? The business of discipling is down here - on the earth."

That was a new discovery for me. I think it is the essence of the text, the kernel of meaning. It certainly strikes me as the relevant word of God to His people. "Don't get caught looking up! The action is down here."

The word is crisp and relevant precisely because standing around and looking up is such a respectable religious activity. The dynamic is as old as the Bible itself. Moses ran up and down the side of Mount Sinai between his private meetings with the Almighty and the people at the bottom of the hill kept doing very human things like building idols and straying from the striahgt and narrow. Amos and Micah, described a piety more concerned with heavenly matters like incense and

ritual than earthy concerns like fairness in the marketplace and peace among nations.

The Greeks institutionalized the propensity by teaching that the world of the spirit and the world of the flesh were distinct and that the realm of the spirit was good, pure, the domain of God; while the world of human life was singularly suspect, sinful, imperfect, flawed. The impact of that philosophical position was immense. Heaven, the realm of goodness and light, is out of this world. Pre-Capernaum people thought it was "up" - in the sky. Life in the world, in the meantime, is to be endured in preparation for the glorious day of release and escape. We still regard "worldly" as a pejorative word...something churches and clergy should not be.

Religion based on that premise is not irrelevant by accident. Otherworldly religion is intentionally irrelevant: its focus is intentionally the hereafter, not the here and now: its gaze is intentionally and vigorously trained on the sky instead of city street. Religion based on the old premise often stands out in stark contrast to the struggles, hopes and dreams of people in the world.

Yale Chaplain John Vannorsdall writes, "A lot of us don't want to hear that life is lived in this world. The world, we say, is a bitter place, a dirty place full of temptation and sin. True enough. But Jesus Christ sent us into the world, refused to pray His disciples out of the world, and it seems clear that He was serious."

Otherworldly religion often looks like one of the opponents of human concerns such as justice. Christianity looked suspiciously like one of the cultural props for the institution of slavery. The promise of bliss in the hereafter, made servitude seem somehow less atrocious. Only recently to those who perpetrated it have we discovered that the slaves knew all along the liberating Gospel of freedom, and that when they sang"Swing Low Sweet Chariot" it wasn't always pie in the sky but the underground railroad they had in mind. In El Salvador today the twenty families which own 70% of the land feel betrayed by the church, which has suddenly and vigorously taken a stand against the system that allows tremendous wealth and poverty to exist side by side. For centuries Christianity supported the oligarchy and solved the misery of the peasants by promising bliss in heaven - later.

In his monumental work, "Does God Exist?" Hans Kung suggests that atheism has been supported and encouraged, not so much by its academic proponents as by religion which is divorced from the human struggle for freedom. He quotes the classic critique of Lenin which I believe religious people should hear in every age. Lenin wrote: "Religion is opium for the people. Religion is a kind of spiritual intoxicant in which the desire for a decent human exisitence is drowned." Lenin said that people who are aware of this leave heaven to the priests and fight for a better life for here and now. (p. 239).

One of the great tragedies of the 20th century is that too frequently Evangelical Christianity has bowed out of the universal human struggle for a better life, for freedom from hunger, disease, and political oppression, leaving the field wide open to Marxism. We have been caught looking up.

The direction of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the meantime is toward the world. Incarnation means the infinite becoming finite, heavenly word becoming human being. Vannorsdall put it simply: "God came into the world to redeem the world, not to facilitate the escape of a few." (The Protestant Hour,5/31/81,p.28).

And every week we affirm our own commitment to that direction in the phrase of the prayer repeated so frequently we haven't thought about its meaning for years. "Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven."

The Presbyterian witness, at its best, has looked squarely and honestly at the world. It has rolled up its sleeves and gone to work on the ambitious project of building God's kingdom, not in remote commune or in opulently decorated temple but right in the middle of the world, and all the ambiguities of human life. It is the greatness of this church, I submit, that instead of looking up, Presbyterian men and women here have consistently seen the locus of their mission in the world, the streets of this city to be precise.

You have seen bits and pieces of that story this morning. The Foundations for the Future project intends to equip this congregation for its ministry for years to come. We plan no grand ecclesiastical museum. Rather, what I hope every member perceives is a church that sees itself as an instrument to be used in the work of God's Kingdom on earth. That work is varied and interesting and lively, and I don't know of another church more willing to wear itself out and give itself away to serve its people and neighbors and city than this one.

The programs of this church today are planned to be worldly. They are not an exercise in wistful star-gazing. Nor were they in the past. In preparation for this day I reread Fifty Years, the book by William Hamilton Hannum, which tells the story of Broad Street Presbyterian Church from 1887 until 1937.

Bear with me while I share a few vignettes from that history. James Hoge, the father of local Presbyterianism, arrived in Franklinton in 1805 in the company of the Justices of the Ohio Supreme Court with whom he traveled from Springfield. At their invitation he conducted services in the courtroom and as a result was invited to remain and establish a church. The invitation was drafted and signed by Louis Sullivant. The first church was in the West Bank of the River, and in 1813 the First Presbyterian Church, a log building stood on the corner of Spring and Third Streets.

After its organization in 1887 the congregation of this church, an outgrowth of Hoge's First Presbyterian, bought a lot at Garfield and Broad, at the outer edge of the city; a bold and, some thought, foolish venture. Foundations were dug and on Christmas day, 1887, a congregation worshipped in the basement-auditorium: 11:00 a.m.worship, Sunday School at 3:00, a Song Festival at 7:30 and that night, after all had gone home, a fire broke out. By April 22 the first floor auditorium was finished and used for worship. In 1908 the auditorium was enlarged, solid pews replaced upholstered folding chairs and the Session informed the members that seats would not be held past 10:30. A Mrs. Firsbie who lived across the street donated $500 to the church on the condition that the building be constructed at least 20 feet back from the street. Her money was returned. A lobby and hall were added and in 1937 the congregation engaged in a major renovation. The Sanctuary was rearranged, redecorated, refurnished and the old auditorium and chapel renovated to house Sunday School rooms.

Even more interesting to me, however, is the way the congregation's outreach and mission in the community claimed constant priority attention.

In 1909 the church took over an existing, independent Sunday School at 164 West Main Street, hired a superintendent and before long held sewing classes and groups for "physical training and social diversion". We have always been pragmatic in our concept of the Kingdom, that is to say.

A severe flood in 1913 called the church to a typically generous response as food, clothing and shelter were provided. By 1915 the church had constructed a new building at 115 West Main Street and was sponsoring church services, Sunday School classes, Kindergarten, a free medical clinic, a library and full gymnasium program.

In 1937, at the rededication of this Sanctuary, J. Harry Cotton challenged the congregation, in his sermon, to see their Christian vocation in terms of making a difference in the world. "What will a citizen of Columbus write in his annals," he asked,"about the difference this church made?"

The tradition is deeply rooted here. Christian people are not standing around looking up into the sky, but busily working, helping, healing, serving and praying for God's Kingdom on earth. The program launched today is designed to continue and to strengthen that tradition and that commitment.

I made a very interesting discovery while reading that book. The organizational meeting of Broad Street Presbyterian Church, 105 men and women, convening at Broad Street Methodist Church, was held on Septmeber 20, 1887, 94 years ago to the day. One could make too much of that. My hope, my prayer, however, is that what we do on September 20, 1981, follow the pattern of the past and that Broad Street Presbyterians, in our day, see the responsibility and privilege of building this church and keeping it strong for generations to come.

The temptation in religion is always to stand around gazing up at the sky. The challenge of this church is to keep its gaze level, focused on the world, the people of our neighborhood, the streets of the city, the lives of each of its members. That is where the risen Christ will come - that is where His Kingdom will be built - that is where human life is lived - life Jesus Christ came to make whole. May God bless us in this ministry.

Amen.

Lord of the church, we thank you for your call to discipleship. We thank you for those who have heard it before us, and we pray for those who will come after us. Now, in this time, bless us - give us strength, courage and love to do your will, to be your people, to build your church, to establish your kingdom. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.